

By U.S. Representative Debbie Halvorson (IL-11)

As a mother, grandmother, wife, aunt, sister and friend - I celebrate Women's History Month in March. I do it with honor because not long ago grown women could not vote, own property, sign a contract or maintain wages they earned in this country. It was less than 100 years ago in 1920, when women finally received the right to vote.

Equal rights came in bits and pieces - and it continues to trickle in. Every time we move the glass ceiling, there's a story of strong and courageous women - and men who are behind it. So many have worked hard and sacrificed to assure equal rights for women - and even today, during this month's celebration, there is evidence everywhere of women doing all they can to advance other women.

A few weeks ago I really enjoyed introducing Kathleen Glenney Kallan of Joliet who was the 2009 recipient of the Advancement of Women Award by the Zonta Club of Joliet. As the first female judge in Joliet, Kathleen had quite a story to tell as she reflected on the dynamics of being the only woman in an all-man's world. From the onset of her career - to her retirement just a few years ago, Kathleen "broke ground" in many ways and helped pave the way for women in the legal profession.

I also had the pleasure of attending a breakfast this month for The Rosie Fund, a group that is very near and dear to my heart. In 2004, a few of us came together to build an organization in the Kankakee area that also supports the advancement of women. They focus on women who are experiencing "a bump in the road" and need short-term assistance. Through their support, women who are experiencing roadblocks receive a helping hand to move forward.

The power of women runs in many directions as I experienced this month at the newly formed 11th District Veterans Advisory Committee. We brought this group together to discuss veterans' needs, issues and legislation - and the first meeting went well. However, I learned that issues affecting women veterans are even more complex - and not exactly equal. In fact, the vets spoke passionately for attention to women's health care, mental health and sexual trauma issues, as well as employment and childcare concerns through the VA (Department of Veterans' Affairs). With the number of female veterans continuing to increase, so does the need. As the only Illinois representative sitting on the U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I'm ready

for healthy dialogue on this and other issues.

While some think the government needs to do more for women's rights, I can say that their issues continue to be addressed at the legislative level. In fact, one of my first actions as Congresswoman was to cosponsor and help pass the Lilly Ledbetter Act, which insists on equal pay for equal work. The passing of this act is evidence that women's and other issues continue to be addressed in an environment when so much time is focused on the economy. Just as when I was in the State Senate working for woman's health, safety and education, I will continue to address women's issues as your Congresswoman.

Even though we still experience concerns when it comes to women's rights, this month of celebrating women has been a good one for me. I've met so many trailblazers and advocates in my district and D.C. who are strong, courageous and truly make a difference. It's been great getting to know them - and I am proud to have had the opportunity. I really look forward to meeting more of you in the future.